



Patrick Henry

1736–1799

Patrick Henry was born in 1736 to John Henry and Sarah Winston Henry in Hanover County, Virginia. He did not attend school. His father taught him at home to read and to speak Latin. As a young man, he was unsuccessful at farming; Henry later opened and ran a store but incurred a large debt and was forced to close the business. Henry married at the age of 18 and needed income to support his young family. At last, Henry decided to become a lawyer. He taught himself everything he needed to know for the attorney's examination he took and passed in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1760.

He was successful as a lawyer and developed the Parsons' Cause document. This defended the colonies' right to set the price of tobacco. Henry was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1764. From this point, he began speaking against the rule of England. He was one of the most vocal supporters of the rights of the American colonies. During this time, Britain's Lord Dunmore was the Virginia governor. The members of the House of Burgesses spoke against the Stamp Act England imposed. (The Stamp Act placed a tax on all printed documents colonists used or created, and the money from the tax funded the defense of the American frontier near the Appalachian Mountains.) This upset Lord Dunmore, and he dissolved the House of Burgesses. As a result, members of the House of Burgesses organized a meeting at a local tavern in Williamsburg. They sent a request to the colonies to send delegates to the First Continental Congress.

On March 23, 1775, Patrick Henry called his fellow Virginians to arms against British tyranny. It was then that he delivered his famous speech, "Give me liberty or give me death," which echoed the sentiments of every patriot. This speech is said to have been the factor that inspired Virginians to march on Lord Dunmore and the British troops in retaliation for the British taking munitions from the Virginia armory. This was the beginning of the Revolutionary War in Virginia. This occurred hours after the Battle of Concord in Massachusetts. Although Henry was willing to engage on the battlefield, many officials felt his actions were too erratic; and he was better suited for positions in governmental office and delivering speeches.



In June 1776, Patrick Henry was elected the first governor of Virginia. While in office, he made sure the colonial soldiers were supplied with clothing and food. He also made sure Virginia produced ammunition, and he arranged for the defense of the Virginia coast. Henry remained in office until 1779. He was elected governor again from 1784 to 1786. He ultimately served five, one-year terms as governor.

Patrick Henry was an eloquent orator who supported the rights of the colonies to govern themselves; however, he did not believe in a strong, centralized government. He believed each state should be granted the power to govern itself through elected officials. It was this belief that led Henry to organize the Virginia delegates to oppose ratifying the U.S. Constitution.

After his retirement from public office in 1794, Patrick Henry lived the rest of his life on Red Hill Plantation in Virginia. He resumed his private legal practice, but in 1795, George Washington convinced Henry to be a candidate for state legislature because the young republic was in danger. There were many who felt each state should have the power to nullify the acts of the federal government. Soon, his failing health forced him to decline many other positions such as Secretary of the State, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Minister to Spain and France, and a sixth term as governor. As his last public act, Henry delivered an inspirational speech pleading with government officials to preserve the unity of the nation.

Patrick Henry died on June 6, 1799, silencing “The Voice of the Revolution.”

Name: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. What career brought Patrick Henry success?
2. What governmental offices did Patrick Henry hold?
3. What is an orator?
4. What does it mean to be patriotic?
5. What event preceded Lord Dunmore's dissolving the Virginia House of Burgesses?

